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Opinion

ON CIVILIANS AND INTELLIGENCE

(The Monitor)

U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird is reported to be considering a major innovation at the Pentagon, a civilian to be in charge of intelligence gathering and evaluating. And high time.

One of the very big lessons which came out of the "Pentagon Papers" was that Pentagon intelligence was different all through the Vietnam war period from intelligence gathered at CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and at the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR). And there seems to be little doubt about which was the more reliable.

The Pentagon's intelligence from its own sources was guilty all through of underestimating the capabilities of that other side and of overestimating what various levels of American forces could accomplish. The most pertinent fact about it is that in 1965 Lyndon Johnson agreed to the commitment of a half a million Americans to Vietnam on the assumption that it would be all over successfully in ample time for the 1968 election.

Had President Johnson listened to CIA and State Department intelligence rather than to Pentagon intelligence he would not have made that mistake. Their reports and estimates were consistently closer to reality.

The reason for the difference is plain enough. CIA and State's INR are both staffed by full-time professionals in intelligence work, most of them civilians. There are a good many former military men in these services, but they are men (and women) who have gone permanently into intelligence, not

just for a short tour of duty.

Military intelligence is heavily staffed, and always so far, headed by officers to whom it is a temporary duty between regular service tours. They are not professionals devoting their entire time to intelligence. Nor are they civilians who can see such matters from a nonservice-connected point of view. It is difficult for an Army, Navy or Air Force officer to forget his own service when handling intelligence. His inevitable tendency is to hear, see, and stress any information or purported information which will enhance the role of his own service, particularly if he is going on in that service.

Ideally, the Pentagon would take its intelligence from CIA and INR. CIA has no ax to grind but its own, and there is really almost nothing it can want which it doesn't already have -- including relative anonymity and total freedom from detailed scrutiny in the Congress. A select committee of Congress goes over its budget every year. Much of it is totally secret. There are never any debates on the CIA budget in Congress. The committee is always generous to CIA. It has no special reason to turn out anything but the most objective intelligence it can manage to produce.

The Pentagon won't take its intelligence from the CIA. Human nature doesn't work like that. But it would help to have a nonservice-connected civilian in charge of Pentagon intelligence. It would reduce the likelihood of another Vietnam war.